

# ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA – Social History

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## Part I : Mesopotamian Social Structure

**Overview** For a long period of time, 4500-1750 B.C.E., Mesopotamian (Sumerian, Babylonian, Akkadian) cultures remained fairly stable. This stability reflects on the level of social class. Much time was devoted to fighting and land expansion--the Assyrian Empire under Sargon was particularly aggressive--and the hierarchical structure of society was recognizably the same for more than two millennia. While there was limited mobility within the social structure, it was not frozen against entrepreneurs who struck it rich, or slaves who developed special skills on which they built reputation, but it was not in the nature of the system to allow such people to ‘climb socially.’

### The high class

**The King (rarely, the Queen)** The King, occupying a typically inherited position, was the final word in law-making, foreign policy, and military campaigning. However the King, who was viewed as a direct spokesperson for the will of the gods, shared some of his highest powers with the priestly class, which specialized in interpreting and placating the will of the gods. Around the King’s court, as around any top administrator, flocked an ardent bevy of counselors and officials, eager for a piece of the action.

**Priests** The priestly class was charged with temple and cult maintenance, and especially with interpreting the will of the gods, the understanding of which was fundamental for governmental policy. It must be added that the temples, as in the Egyptian culture of the time, were places of education and training in the arts of healing. The doctors and dentists of ancient Mesopotamia were frequently women who worked and lived at the temple.

**Merchants and traders** As Mesopotamian society grew socially looser, and more open to change, the large class of merchants and traders, the major money-makers of this early capital culture, occupied a central role in generating and maintaining new economic horizons.

**Scribes** With the ‘invention’ of writing in 3500 B.C.E., the function of the scribe, highly educated in writing and literary art, rose to the top of Mesopotamian society. The scribe read and interpreted official documents, and was often called into decision making on the highest levels of government.

**Others** Among others who enjoyed some of the highest positions in society were wealthy landowners, shipwrights--who supplied the growing merchant fleets--private tutors, and astrologers.

**The middle class** The Middle class was what made the society tick, as it does today. We would need here to consider the whole spectrum of workers--fishermen, farmers, artisans, potters--and all those who supported the daily life of the society, either directly through their labor or through their investments of time or money.

**The lower class** The lower class was made up of slaves, children, and prisoners, a combination that can make sense only if we consider the issue of rights. None of these groups had rights. Did women have rights? This is a vexed question. Some women rose to great prominence: as doctors, dentists, or spiritual healers; or as authors--the first named author in history--Enheduanna (2285-2230 B .C.E.)--was female, and yet women on the street, the vast majority, had no access to the arts of literacy or education, or to any political voice.

## Readings

Oppenheim, A. Leo, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a dead civilization*, Chicago, 1977.

Pollock, Susan, *Ancient Mesopotamia: The Eden that never was*, Cambridge, 1999.

## Discussion questions

How do you explain the prominence of women as doctors and dentists in ancient Mesopotamia (as in ancient Egypt)?

At what period did the stable (static) social hierarchy begin to establish itself in Mesopotamia? What forces led to this establishment, and preserved it for millennia?

What kind of training led to the profession of scribe, and why was this role so influential in Mesopotamian society.?

## Part II : Mesopotamian Gender Roles

**Overview** The concept of Mesopotamian culture (5000-2000 B.C.E.) is so broad, that it must at first be addressed in generalities. From Sumerian through Assyrian, Akkadian, Babylonian cultures--all interlinked through their roots in the land between Tigris and Euphrates--there is a gradual enforcement of patriarchal power in both family and state. What explanation for this development? Could it be that with the growing concentration of wealth, in male hands, the preponderance of male power asserted itself increasingly? Was money the power in this story?

**Women and the family** Throughout Mesopotamian culture, the father is the family ruler. He takes charge of choosing his daughter's husband to be, having worked out financial arrangements in advance, with the bride's dad. These arrangements involve first of all setting the brideprice, which he himself will pay down for his daughter, and then agreeing on the dowry which his daughter will bring to the marriage. The daughter will from puberty on--for that is when these negotiations begin--be aware that she is a movable piece in a system. She will not have been given the opportunity for schooling, and in extreme cases she may even have found herself sold into slavery or 'sacred prostitution.'

**The marriage** Immediately after marriage the daughter--we are talking middle class families, artisans, scribes, bakers, bankers--moves into the husband's family, thereby essentially marrying that family. From that time on the married woman's life is likely to transpire in child-raising, cooking, cleaning, and gossip. (*The Laws of Hammurabi*, 1754 B.C.E, effectively describe the parameters of the married woman's life, easily to be divorced, condemned to death if she commits adultery, subject to sale if her husband needs extra cash.) But there are outlets for women, although the availability of these outlets diminishes through the centuries of Mesopotamian culture.

**Women's outlets** From Sumerian times onward, through to the demise of Mesopotamian cultures (2000 B.C.E.), depending on your perspective, women had rights and roles in their society. The supreme role for the woman, juridically speaking, was to provide legitimate offspring for the integrity of the patriarchal system. Hence the death penalty for women caught in adultery; hence the increasing presence of the *veil*, in later Mesopotamian society, to shield women and men's eyes from danger. From the earliest times, however, Mesopotamian women enjoyed freedom to work outside the family; in Sumerian times, particularly, women were active in the market place and in trading in the precincts of temples, which regularly employed thousands of weavers. Other jobs commonly filled by women were the making and selling of beer and wine, or of perfumes and incense. And on a yet more managerial level--still in Sumer, yes--we find women forming businesses, working together with their husbands in business, working as scribes--always an influential post, and as physicians.

## Readings

Frymer-Kensky, Tikva, *In the Wake of the Goddesses*, New York, 1992.

Leick, Gwendolyn, *Sex and Eroticism in Mesopotamian Literature*, London, 1994.

### **Discussion questions**

Mesopotamian epic gives various perspectives onto women and their social roles: what do *Gilgamesh*, the *Epic of Creation (Enuma Elish)* and *The Descent of Inana* say about women's power in society?

What role did women's sexuality play in the all important issue of placating the gods? What kinds of erotic self-sacrifice did women carry out in Mesopotamian temples?

By 1500 B.C.E. upper class women, in Mesopotamian society, had begun to 'wear the veil,' as a way of protecting their modesty, and the purity of their offspring. Can you research this issue? Was wearing the veil common in Middle Eastern societies prior to Islam?